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Section: Academic articles

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Invisible intensities: exploring (extra)ordinary affects in a virtual space

Shannon A.B. Perry¹

Abstract

This essay explores how, over the course of writing biographical articles about women artists into Wikipedia, the online crowdsourced encyclopedia, I became moved, touched, changed through interactions with digital materials. Following the initial exhilaration of submitting a first edit, I consider how other surprising intensities unfolded through sustained participation in this collaborative creative activity. Relating these to Kathleen Stewart's concept of ordinary affects, I wonder about how these intensities came to be and imagine where they may lead, turning to the artful methods of poetry and digital collage to map connections which escaped encyclopedic rendering. Ultimately, I suggest these invisible intensities reflected emerging posthuman relational subjectivities and corresponding possibilities for affirmative creative action.

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After clicking the blue "Publish changes" button, I hit refresh. The next instant saw the words tapped from my fingers just moments ago reappear on the screen. They now sat alongside other words and sentences, contributed by anonymous co-authors across the globe, readable by anyone in the world looking for reliable information about COVID-19 on this popular site for retrieving fact-based information. I became filled with wonder and an acute sense that this activity *did something*, carried some potential which I could not quite name, to affect the world. Feeling simultaneously exhilarated, empowered, and determined to repeat this experience, I took note: it was March 5, 2020; I was on Wikipedia, the free, crowdsourced online encyclopedia; and, I had just become one of their thousands of volunteer editors.

My felt sense of excitement in the wake of this encounter led me to ask: What is the nature of the feelings which overtook me in the act of contributing to Wikipedia? What potentials does this online encounter unfold? As I continued to edit the site, I sought to understand the multiple layers of these intensities—where they came from and where they might lead.

Collaboratively creating a virtual world

The initial stages of seeking to understand this encounter involved figuring out what Wikipedia even was. This now 20-year-old experiment in collaborative digital authorship and knowledge sharing defied all initial expectations. Its pursuit of a familiar goal (creating an encyclopedia) contributed to, but does not fully explain, the unlikely success Wikipedia became. Decisions

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to develop its underlying open-source wiki technology infrastructure to facilitate collective, rather than individual, authorship² and adhocratic governance³ played incalculably significant roles in shaping its fate.

Through a convergence of many factors, Wikipedia now ranks as one of the most trafficked sites on the Internet.⁴ English Wikipedia, alone, receives between nine and ten billion page views each month.⁵ The content generated within its domains also possesses a reach far beyond Wikipedia, for example, by populating side bar information on Google search pages.⁶ That many organizations, businesses, governments, political parties, as well as private individuals attempt to manipulate their coverage on the encyclopedia indicates the potentially profound influence Wikipedia wields in shaping public perception and the ‘real’ world.⁷

In learning about the platform and thinking about how frequently I used the site, I reflected on how the exhilarating experience of participation came about as a result of the ordinary daily activities of desiring and searching for information online. In this time of social media ubiquity, the participative nature of the activity could only partly account for this feeling. Another aspect of what I felt in that initial participative moment was the dawning recognition that Wikipedia exceeded what I had imagined. As I came to understand more about Wikipedia’s history and structure, my wonder at this complex and restless digital palimpsest grew. One’s contribution might be elaborated, reworked, or erased completely tomorrow, or in the next minute. I dreamt about how one might map the multiple lines of desire that lead one to a digital place, perhaps a specific page, and what such an encounter may produce. Wikipedia became, in my mind, a field of invisible intensities.

Kathleen Stewart’s concept of ordinary affects, which she described as “the varied, surging capacities to affect and be affected” in the “weighted reeling present” of daily activity resonated most with how I experienced this dynamic virtual field.⁸ Unlike Stewart’s poetically rendered vignettes of affective life, my ordinary affects involved digital tools and spaces, reflecting a posthuman reality characterized by “the intimacy [many humans] have developed with technological devices.”⁹ I felt empowered by this “technologically mediated and globally interlinked” reality that situated me in an “effective intimacy with the world and a sense of engagement in a web of ever-shifting relations and perpetual becoming” of vital material.¹⁰ I possessed a keen sense, too, that these living circuits of potential were also political because of “where [they] might go. What [might] happen.”¹¹

²Benjamin Mako Hill. “Essays on Volunteer Mobilization in Peer Production,” PhD diss., (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013).

³Piotr Konieczny. “Adhocratic Governance in the Internet Age: A Case of Wikipedia,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 7, no. 4 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2010.489408>

⁴“The top 500 sites on the web,” Alexa, accessed March 26, 2021. <https://www.alexa.com/topsites>

⁵“Wikimedia Statistics,” Wikimedia Foundation, accessed April 1, 2021. <https://stats.wikimedia.org/#/all-wikipedia-projects>

⁶Louise Matsakis. “Google Gives Wikipedia Millions—Plus Machine Learning Tools,” *Wired*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/google-wikipedia-machine-learning-glow-languages/>

⁷Jialel Jiang and Matthew A. Vetter. “The Good, the Bot, and the Ugly: Problematic Information and Critical Media Literacy in the Postdigital Era,” *Postdigital Science and Education* 2, no. 1 (2020).

⁸Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–2.

⁹Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), 3.

¹⁰Braidotti, 48.

¹¹Stewart, 15.

Where else, after all, could one find a model of collaborative creativity¹² and self-organization on this scale?¹³ What motivates individuals to invest so much creative energy and time to build and maintain an intangible good they could never claim ownership of? Braidotti argued that “politics begins with assembling ... a community constructed around a shared understanding” in “a space of encounter ... where forms of action can be produced, about our shared hopes and aspirations.”¹⁴ Though Wikipedia aims for the neutral presentation of facts, in this digital commons, I felt, in this virtual space, potentials for thinking differently, hyperlinking in creative and connective ways, and mapping the unknown.

Despite this seemingly cyber utopian view, I understood Wikipedia had problems. Less than 20% of biographical articles on the encyclopedia focus on women, and an even smaller percentage of editors self-identify as women.¹⁵ Many women editors leave due to negative experiences with Wikipedia’s competitive, conflict-laden culture.¹⁶ My concern for these issues led me to focus my ongoing participation with Women in Red, an internal Wikipedia community educating around how systemic biases of the offline world become inscribed into the online encyclopedia.

Women in Red’s ultimate goals lie in creation. By creating, editing, and writing articles and other digital materials about women, this community engages in “generating affirmative relations” and cultivating “affirmative ethical forces capable of increasing our relational capacity.”¹⁷ I had no way of knowing in the beginning how far this relational capacity might extend and the additional layers of affective intensity I would experience as my participation deepened and I began to write the life stories of women artists.

Surfacing artful posthuman subjectivities

Something happened as I engaged in the ordinary scholarly activities of searching databases, digging for articles, highlighting, asking questions, collecting facts. These seemingly lifeless bits of data seemed to take on a life of their own in assembling the lives of the women artists I wrote about. They became collaborators in their own right, compelling me to weave and re-connect them, the scattered details of their lives, through words and hyperlinks with the people, events, things and places they touched and were touched by in their lives. I became filled with a sense of responsibility, aware of how the encounters of future unknown readers with these women, through this biographical material, depended on my compositional choices.

Another strange experience unfolded as I labored over how to bring these women to life in appropriately encyclopedic style while reflecting my own delight. Somehow these women began to feel like more than images and words. They became friends who spoke to me, people

¹²Vlad-Petre Glăveanu. "Principles for a Cultural Psychology of Creativity," *Culture & Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2010).

¹³Konieczny, “Adhocratic Governance.”

¹⁴Braidotti, 36.

¹⁵Claudia Wagner, Eduardo Graells-Garrido, David Garcia, and Filippo Menczer, “Women Through the Glass Ceiling: Gender Asymmetries in Wikipedia,” *EPJ Data Science* 5, no. 5 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-016-0066-4>

¹⁶Julia B. Bear & Benjamin Collier, “Where are the Women in Wikipedia? Understanding the Different Psychological Experiences of Men and Women in Wikipedia,” *Sex Roles* 74 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0573-y>

¹⁷Braidotti, 50.

I thought and dreamt about, who were touching and changing me.

I chose to write about women artists because I've always felt moved in reading about how artists' life experiences and struggles inevitably inform the perspectives and methods they embrace. The research and writing involved in composing their life stories inspired me in many ways I expected. What I did not expect was how so many of these women approached matter, the material, as if it were imbued with vital, vibrant force.¹⁸ They illustrated and brought me face-to-face with what posthuman subjectivities might look and act like. Their ways of doing reflected deep relational capacities and sensitivities for spanning the illusory boundaries between the human and nonhuman and to see life teeming in the supposedly inanimate.

Mary Le Ravin possessed a spiritual relationship to animal bones, and she transformed these everyday materials, common remainders on the dinner plate, into humorous and sacred sculpture.¹⁹ Luce Turnier's still lifes and landscapes, alongside her collage experimentations with natural fibers and other found materials, admitted strong inspiring relations to place.²⁰ Nena Saguil's cosmic abstractions, described as biological microcosms as often as celestial macrocosms, bespoke an awe-inspiring de-centering of human-ness communicating "that human existence and the universe are mutually encompassing."²¹

Discovering all this moved me to think about the ways many artists already practice ways of knowing, doing, and becoming that embrace a vital materialist or posthuman perspective. It also led me to think more deeply about the potential for moving individuals toward critical materialist and ethical posthuman subjectivities through the arts, an idea taken up by many arts-based education researchers.²² Writing these women's lives brought to life Braidotti's suggestion that some of us "may always already have been posthuman, or may yet become it, depending on our embedded perspectives."²³ Through their relationships and experiments with matter, these artists were enacting posthuman subjectivities long before the term's invention.

In their biographical articles, I attempted to emphasize the posthuman subjectivities I perceived in these women's artistic practices. When the conventions of encyclopedic writing prevented the fullness of the experience from representation on the published page, where the women's words of wisdom became obscured or never achieved their full impact, I turned to poetry. Because of my frustration at how copyright prevented use of their images and artworks, and when I became aware of how some vibrant image or scene took hold of me, I turned to digital collage. I experimented with these artful methods in attempting to capture invisible aspects of Wikipedia creation, the posthuman experience of resonating with digital words and images, and the affective encounter of intervening in these women's stories, even as they intervened in mine.²⁴

¹⁸Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁹J. Michael Walker, "Reverend Mary Le Ravin: Dwelling in the Boneyard," *The International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 1 (1993).

²⁰Chicago Gallery of Haitian Art, "Luce Turnier (1983 Interview, Part 1)," *YouTube*, January 16, 2016, video, 12:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-oQkQ-u5Rk>

²¹Imelda Cajipe Endaya. "Towards a Herstory of Filipino Women's Visual Arts." *Academia.edu*, 2015, 13.

²²Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund, eds. *Arts-based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

²³Braidotti, 74.

²⁴The following digital collages were created in Photoshop using the following images: [Small mammal bones – pellet \(ornithology\).jpg](#), MAKY.OREL, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons; [Halo-Großkrotzenburg-2020.09.06.jpg](#), Patrick Looß, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons; [Caravan in the desert.jpg](#), Sergey Pesterev, CC BY-SA 4.0,

Portrait of Mary Le Ravin (1905-1992)

i'm called Mother Mary
i preach what i know
in my bones–

since a child, i've known God.
one night He said: "Create!
you got glue, sawdust, and bones"

some call me Marie Laveau
call them devil sculptures,
but there was nothing wrong with those bones
when they had meat on them and they were chewing

i took those bones and cleaned them
made them dance
and laugh and sing
what could be wrong with them now?

[July 5, 2020]

Portrait of Luce Turnier (1924-1994)

Paris, 1965–1972–growth–
more abstract
more concentration
i didn't meet people
i didn't need shows

painting and collage
for the fun of it
the people of Haiti
landscapes of France
my husband was a painter
he didn't want me to ...

i'm not going to be commercial
to do what people want
repetition and Voodoo

via Wikimedia Commons; [vevelegba.png](#) and [veveogoun.png](#), Chrkl, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons (figure 1); and [Ocean horizon view \(Unsplash\).jpg](#), Austin Neill arstyy, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons; [Sepia Street in Paris France.jpg](#), Viktor Derek, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons; [Paris, Notre Dame -- 2014 - 1448](#), Dietmar Rabich, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons.; [Sea_shell_\(Trinidad_%26_Tobago_2009\).jpg](#), cheesy42, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons; [Palm Leaf.jpg](#), Eliasjorge4, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons (figure 2).

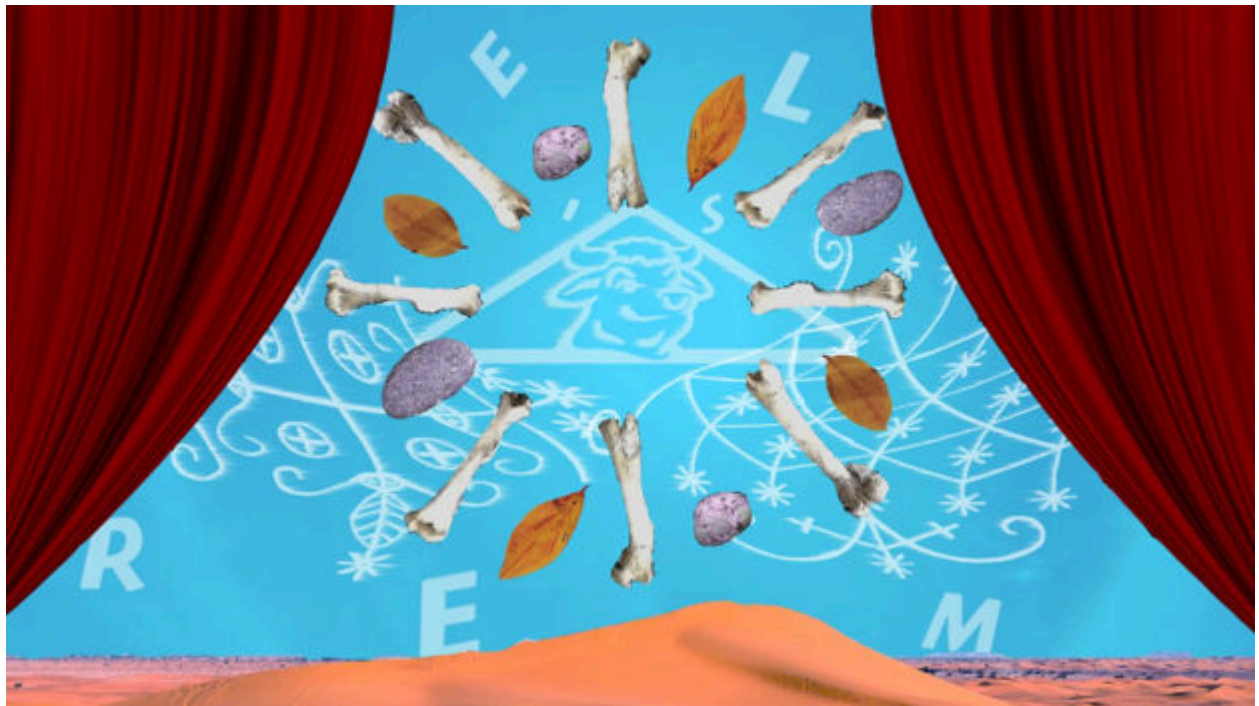


Figure 1. *Dream of Mary Le Ravin*, digital collage. Created by Shannon Perry, December 2020.

i discover—
my eyes and my feeling
play with textures, organic things

i need to work
if i don't feel like it, i work
and after i am happy
glad i make that effort
it's always good

[July 10, 2020]

Portrait of Nena Saguil (1914-1994)

they ask will I come home
to live again—
NO!

in Paris i am free—
unrestrained by
Manila's patriarchal preoccupations
even if, here, sometimes, i play the maid

my paintings are a mathematics
my abstractions lush landscapes
i make *sensate worlds*—

*i do in my own way
in the spirit
and the sentiment
of the present*

[July 21, 2020]

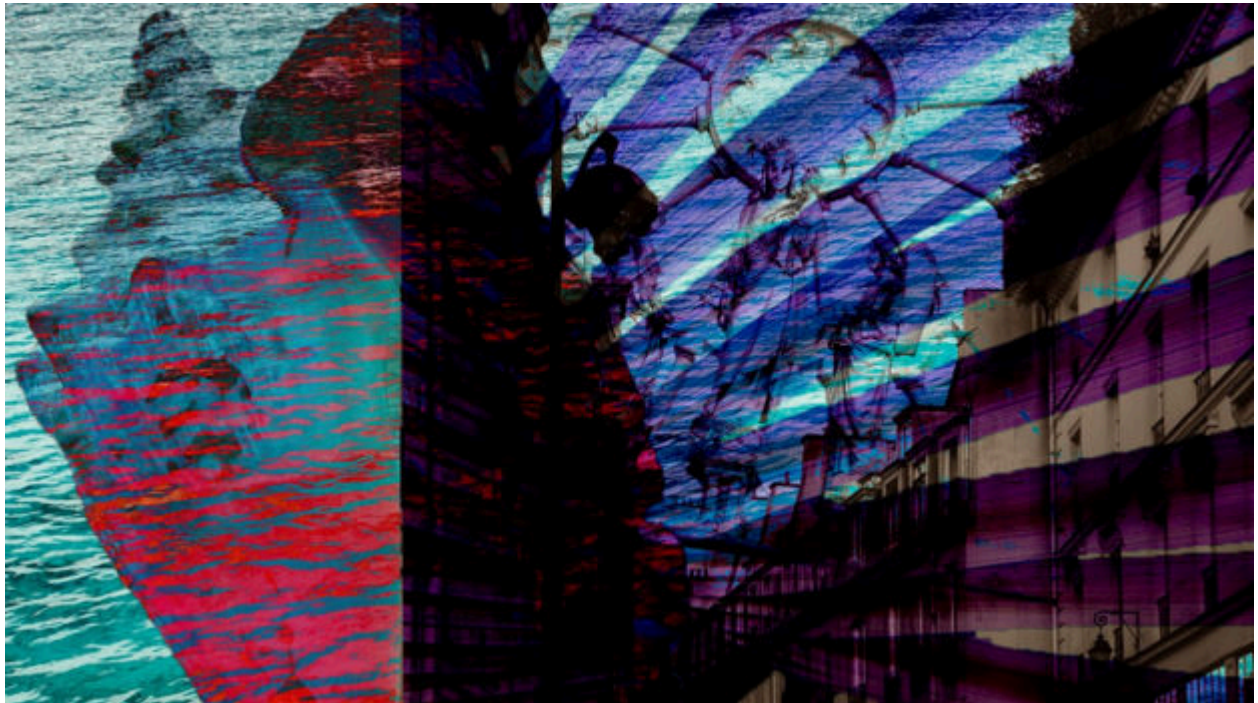


Figure 2. *Dream of Luce Turnier and Nena Saguil*, digital collage. Created by Shannon Perry, January 2021.

Voodoo, islander expats in Paris, abstraction, defying familial and public expectations. The serendipitous connections which emerged between the woman as I read and wrote also produced affective resonances I could not ignore. These shimmering threads layered over my own memories and wonders, pointing to shared memories and patterns of collective experience. I wondered at Turnier's trailing words: "he didn't want me to..." She need not finish. Memories of being discouraged from pursuing desired paths rushed back. I understood the compulsion to travel far from home and intuited the exhilaration and pain of becoming outsider, which these artists each experienced and embraced in their own unique ways. These luminous connections, invisible threads, formed links unable to be tamed by hyperlink or made intelligible within the logic of an encyclopedia, even one as connective as Wikipedia. This reality compelled me to create the above artistic mappings off-wiki.

These artistic representations attempt to reflect Stewart's concept of ordinary affects as forces, "public feelings," shared social currents that emerge for individuals in intimate spaces and the often mundane experiences of day-to-day life. They try to depict "an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures. ... a kind of contact zone."²⁵ They seek to make visible, through art, the invisible affective intensities that flow through ordinary posthuman realities.

Mapping further constellations

Wikipedia participation attuned me to how different modes, such as the linguistic or the visual, conveyed affects. That I, ultimately, could not include in their articles the most captivating materials and details which moved me and brought these artists to life as people frustrated me. I recognized that videos and images greatly affected me, re-committing me to writing about these women, and inspiring my own belief that I, too, could make art. This realization affirmed a growing intuitive sense that the most powerfully affective articles would engage the senses with images and words and sound.

That images and movement activated me attuned me to the multimodal nature of affective force, particularly in the digital context. Jewitt et al. argued for attending to multimodality in the ways researchers design and present research, particularly research conducted in digital contexts. They advocated for artful, multimodal methodologies which are more inclusive of the body's sensemaking, arguing for their compatibility with feminist posthuman new material theorists' insistence on "the need to re-engage with how culture is materially mediated and inscribed."²⁶ In their work around implementing arts-based interventions for organization development, Taylor and Ladkin made a similar point that the nature of the materials involved will dictate the range of affective relationships and outcomes any artful interaction may produce.²⁷

Perhaps I had already become attuned to the idea of vibrant matter through my past arts engagements with music and poetry. Perceiving words as possessing colors and whole moods helped me wade through the long list of women names, which all appeared as red links indicating they were awaiting articles to be written about them. I selected Mary, or she selected me, because I always found that name alluring. But other serendipitous encounters happened. Ann Orr Morris, Leighla Whipper, and Arester Earl jumped out at me before I scanned the table columns to realize they were from my home state of Georgia. Though I felt guided by forces beyond my conscious mind, beyond my intentional self, I only came to realize later how this sifting through lists of names also related to another layer of posthuman reality.

In addition to writing with anonymous human others across the globe, I quickly realized that my Wikipedia co-authors included a diverse range of bots. I knew bots freed me from having to think about the minutiae of Wikipedia's style guide and even cleaned up some of my grammar mistakes. I thought of them as pre-programmed scripts that trawled Wikipedia, tidying up text after the writing fact. I've come to think of them in a less distant way, recognizing the

²⁵Stewart, 3.

²⁶Carey Jewitt, Sara Price, and Anna Xambo Sedo, "Conceptualising and Researching the Body in Digital Contexts: Towards New Methodological Conversations Across the Arts and Social Sciences," *Qualitative Research* 17, no 1 (2016): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794116656036>

²⁷Steven S. Taylor and Donna Ladkin, "Understanding Arts-Based Methods in Managerial Development," *Academy of Management* 8, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2009.37012179>

influence automation tools play even in the trajectories in which I felt great control over my actions and decisions in the platform.

I initially perceived the list of red links to be collated by human members of the Women in Red community. Only much more recently have I realized how most of these lists which highlight gaps in the encyclopedia and facilitate locating and choosing women to write about are also created by bots that pull raw data out of a massive Wikidata database. This was not the strictly human, algorithm-free endeavor I had initially imagined. Without my awareness, I was being assisted by integral bot members of the community. We were acting in synergy, co-creating a desirable present-moment experience and future-dream, enacting, possibly, an affirmative posthuman relation and ethics.²⁸

Conclusion

The exhilarating intensities which unfolded as I wrote Wikipedia intertwine with the affordances and limitations of the platform and the potentials activated by its bringing together human and non-human actors, physical and virtual matter, and past, present and future temporalities in unpredictable configurations. They relate to its global reach and, therefore, potential to wield enormous influence in disrupting dominant narratives and contributing to shifts in collective human understanding and action. They connect to its participatory nature and invitation to not just create, but continuously collaborate in remaking an encyclopedia and, by extension, a shared world. Exercising this capacity holds the potential to unfold greater senses of personal agency along with a corresponding awareness that our words do more than merely describe the world.

These intensities also relate to the potential for the self to be acted upon, remade, re-written through new relations. Encountering the ordinary affects of ordinary women artists and the posthuman subjectivities they performed reconfigured my own being and thinking. Different modes of digital matter possessed different capacities for affecting me in ways that mattered. And, my collaborations with distant humans as well as helpful bots transformed my notions of what collaboration could look like and produce.

Finally, these intensities all relate to the fact that Wikipedia is more than a metaphor of a commons or an example of a space where experimenting happens. Rather, it exists as an actual site, accessible to a countless many, where one may enter into and incorporate into one's daily life an ongoing creative participation and practice with diverse others. It exists as a space where posthuman subjectivities are made possible "by embracing an ethics of community-based experiments" and through the exploration of "multiple capacities for relations and modes of communication in a multi-directional manner."²⁹

I'm still discovering how these intensities come to be and where they may lead, but I have come to see this particular virtual site as an "affirmative plane of composition of transversal subjectivities."³⁰ In this space, the ordinary acts of reading, writing, and sharing creative work produce wondrous affective encounters in which to experience collaboratively re-creating the world through our own re-making.

²⁸Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*.

²⁹Braidotti, 63.

³⁰Braidotti, 91.

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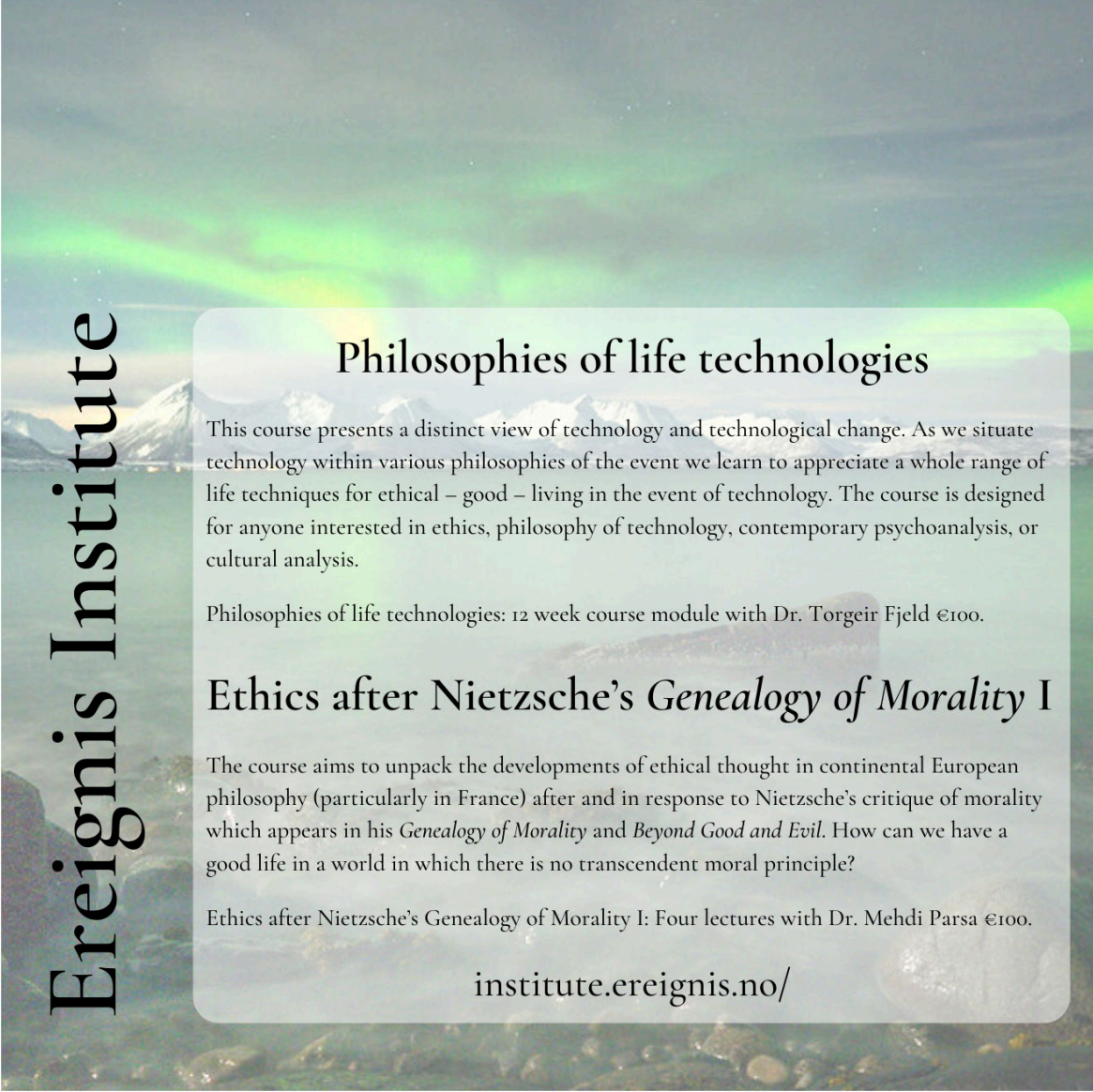
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